

A Place At The Table: A damning picture of hunger, with feeble conclusions

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The documentary *A Place At The Table* deals with the shameful hunger crisis in America. The number of people affected by food insecurity—not knowing where one’s next meal is coming from—has increased from 20 million Americans in the 1980s to 60 million today.

From the opening scenes in the remote village of Collbran, Colorado (population 708), to vignettes of life in rural Mississippi and urban North Philadelphia, the documentary crews effectively present the struggle of people to live normal lives while dominated on a daily basis by the inability to get and maintain a regular source of healthy food.

Rosie, a fifth grader in Collbran, complains about being hungry and not being able to concentrate in class. Rosie’s grandmother Dawn and her mother Trish—who explains that her paycheck amounts to only \$120 every two weeks—describe what it is like trying to keep the family fed.

Barbie Izquierdo, from North Philadelphia, talks about her life as a young, unemployed single mother trying to keep her two children nourished. She is on food assistance. Because processed food was her exclusive diet as a child, she refuses to feed it to her children, which makes her job of providing them a proper diet much harder. Barbie expresses herself eloquently about the circumstances she and her children endure. *A Place At The Table* is a contradictory work. On the one hand, the film truthfully portrays the conditions of widespread layers of the population. On the other, the filmmakers’ political agenda infects and even contradicts the story the film tells.

Advertised as “From the people who brought you [the 2008 documentary] *Food, Inc.*,” the film is produced by Participant Media, the company created by multibillionaire and philanthropist Jeffrey Skoll, originally president of the Internet auction firm eBay.

Participant Media’s stated aim is “to create entertainment that inspires and accelerates social change.”

One of the company’s notable productions is *Waiting for ‘Superman’* (2010), ostensibly a documentary, but, in reality, a right-wing attack on public education. The unwaveringly pro-Obama outlook of the production company weighs heavily on the narrative in *A Place At The Table*.

The film is directed by Lori Silverbush, wife of reality TV’s *Top Chef* star Tom Colicchio (who also executive produces and stars in the film) and Kristi Jacobsen.

No doubt, many of those involved have good intentions, desiring to turn the attention of the public to the widespread hunger and misery that exist in American society.

Impressive cinematography and production values are brought to bear. Original music by T-Bone Burnett and the pop duo The Civil Wars provides the soundtrack. A certain depth is provided by the many food and nutrition experts who are featured.

Participant Media released the documentary on March 1 as a multimedia event. It is available online through iTunes, Amazon and OnDemand, as well as on DVD, and it is also showing in theaters.

The first expert introduced in *A Place at the Table* is Raj Patel, the author of several nutrition policy-related books, including *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*. He explains that hunger and obesity, seemingly mutually exclusive, are closely related.

The state of Mississippi, for example, has the highest rates of both food insecurity and obesity in the US. Rural towns in the state have only small grocery stores that don’t get fruits and vegetables because they are

served on the principle of “maximum delivery, minimum cost.”

Such areas are called “food deserts,” and they are not restricted to rural parts of the US. In North Philadelphia, Barbie is shown making a trek on multiple buses, spending hours to get healthy food for her family.

The experts featured in *A Place At The Table* provide important information about the food crisis, including how the government gives huge subsidies to corporate farms to grow the wrong crops and how the food system is geared toward producing the most profitable foods—corn, soybeans and wheat—rather than healthier foods.

Many of the film’s commentators, including screen actor Jeff Bridges, make the point that the existence of hunger on such a scale in a land of great wealth is unacceptable. This is unquestionable, but the argument tends to be framed in nationalistic, patriotic terms.

It is not accidental, for instance, that Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack is featured speaking before Congress on the issue of obesity. He points out that only 25 percent of young people between the ages of 19 and 24 are eligible for military service because of the prevalence of obesity.

In this way, the filmmakers adapt themselves to the right-wing politics of the entire political establishment. Why can’t a humanitarian appeal be made without couching it in terms of national security?

The political argument in *A Place at the Table* is its weakest, most retrograde element. The filmmakers assert that as a result of a 1968 CBS documentary, “Hunger in America,” the issue was put “on the national agenda.” And that by the late 1970s, hunger in America was almost eliminated because “regular Americans rose up and demanded a public assistance safety net.” A banner text says, “WE CAN DO IT AGAIN.”

This is a falsification of history. If both political parties in the 1960s and early 1970s, including the administration of Richard Nixon, were obliged to make concessions to the population, it was because of the mass political struggles that had erupted and the threat of further social upheaval. Furthermore, American capitalism was still in a position at the time to allocate funds for nutrition and other social programs. The opposite is the case today. The entire political

establishment—including the Democratic Party—is committed to austerity and “fiscal responsibility,” and united in its determination to destroy what little remains of the social safety net.

It is ironic that *A Place At The Table* was released the same day as the sequester cuts took effect.

While the documentary makes numerous references to the US as a prosperous country, it does not refer once to the continual impoverishment of wide layers of the population, at the same time as the upper echelons accumulate unprecedented amounts of wealth. The conditions of social inequality are directly connected to the growth of hunger.

While the various experts in the film make generally correct points about the system of food production and distribution, none of the widely available—and revealing—statistics on unemployment, foreclosures, homelessness and poverty are introduced.

For the broad population, it becomes increasingly self-evident that America functions as a society of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. The creators of *A Place At The Table* decided that reference to these real social divisions had to be avoided.



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